

New
Philanthropy
Capital

Funder Network

Evaluating the pilot knowledge-sharing
website

March 2012

Kimberly Harwood
Matthew van Poortvliet

Executive summary

What can be done to improve learning and knowledge-sharing among charitable funders? How can existing networks be extended to support a wider range of funders and staff? Could a specialist website for funders help to achieve these aims?

In June 2011, the Association of Charitable Foundations (ACF), New Philanthropy Capital (NPC), and the City Bridge Trust ran a six-month pilot project to try and answer these questions. The website, www.fundernetwork.org.uk, was established with the support of a group of nine foundations. Six months on, the pilot site has over 300 users from 150 trusts and foundations, who are using the site to search for information, learn from peers, and share what they know.

As the pilot period comes to a close, this report presents an evaluation, asking: Has the pilot website achieved what it set out to? What worked and what did not? Is there demand to continue it? And if so, how could it be improved?

The value of the site

We surveyed and interviewed website users, finding that the website has been successful in meeting the aims of the pilot. A user base has been established, valuable content has been built, and there is clear appetite among users to continue:

- 88% of those surveyed say that it has given them **a better understanding of what others are doing**, and two-thirds say that it has **helped them to learn about an issue**.
- Nine in ten say that it is valuable resource that they **would like to see continue**, and that the website **provides a 'safe space'** for learning and sharing.
- A third say that it has helped them to **save time in their work**, and acts as a valuable **support network**. One funder says that it is *'the best thing since sliced bread'*.

However some challenges remain:

- More than half of the users surveyed had only visited the site **'once or twice since launch'** or less. Many people noted that there were **barriers within their organisation** that prevented them from participating in the site more actively.
- Most users pointed to a **'lack of time'** as the reason they did not use the site or contribute more, but some people mentioned problems with email alerts and logging on to the site.

The positive answers and comments by far outweigh the constructive negatives. Nevertheless, at its current stage of development, the **site remains 'promising' rather than 'proven'**. It is dependent on a core group of early adopters and on the efforts of ACF to drive interest and content. A critical mass of users still needs to be built for the site to be sustainable in the long term and to offer greater value to a wider range of funders. There are also a number of areas for developing and improving the site.

Next steps

ACF, together with NPC and the City Bridge Trust, plans to continue and develop the website. However, the extent of this will depend on support from funders and, in the longer term, finding a model to make the site sustainable. In response to the evaluation findings, the steering group has identified three priorities for improvement:

1. **Recruiting more users:** To realise the site's potential, it will be critical to build the user base, particularly by reaching out to more smaller and regional organisations, and to more

junior staff within organisations. The survey and interviews demonstrated clear demand for wider involvement.

2. **Growing and categorising the content:** A number of users fed back that the content needs to be easier to search, so that users can find information on the site and email notifications are better targeted to their areas of interest. This also holds the possibility of linking the site to existing groups, such as ACF's Issue Based Networks.
3. **Improving the email notifications:** The notifications are the main link into the site, but at the moment they are not visually interesting, and the links to the site take users to the log-in page, rather than directly to the question on the website. Improving the look and accessibility of these links will be important in improving the flow of traffic to the site.

Further to these priorities, the survey and interviews raised a number of good ideas for additional features, such as a repository of useful documents, a list of existing users, and a calendar of upcoming funder events. We will explore the potential for adding new functions to the website, and look at what can be done to improve it without making it unduly complex or expensive.

How you can help

We welcome your ideas and support in helping to make the website a success. We would like to invite you to participate by contributing resources or ideas, or by signing up to use the website. For those already using the site, we hope that you continue to do so. Specifically, we hope that you will:

- encourage other staff in your organisation to sign up and use the site;
- encourage other funders that you know to get involved;
- log into the site and write a blog, ask a question or answer a question;
- tell us what we can do to improve the site; and
- provide resources or expertise to help us develop the site.

In the months since surveying users and writing this evaluation, we have already seen distinct improvements and growth in the content on the site, and we encourage all readers to continue this progress by getting involved. Please contact Kimberly Harwood at ACF to give us your feedback and find out more: kimberly@acf.org.uk.

Contents

Introduction	5
1. About the site	7
2. Evaluation methodology	10
3. Evaluation findings	11
4. Lessons and recommendations	17
5. Conclusion and next steps	19
Appendix 1: Logic model	20
Appendix 2: Acknowledgements	21

Introduction

The Funder Network website (www.fundernetwork.org.uk) has been designed to improve knowledge-sharing among funders in the UK. It is a closed website that provides a safe space for funders to ask and answer questions, post blogs and comments, and search for information and contacts among trusted peers. It aims to broaden knowledge-sharing to a wider range of organisations and staff, and to provide a simple, online forum for learning that complements existing events and networks.

The site has been run as a pilot project by the Association of Charitable Foundations (ACF) since June 2011. This report assesses its value for users and explores the case for continuing and developing it.

Background

The Funder Network website was developed from a recommendation in *Foundations for knowledge*, a report commissioned by City Bridge Trust and produced by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) in March 2011. NPC's research found that there was a lack of infrastructure for learning and sharing knowledge amongst funders, and that there was a case for developing a central online resource to enable more effective knowledge-sharing between funders.

Although the idea of a knowledge-sharing website made sense logically, previous attempts to create online resources for funders to share knowledge had largely been unsuccessful. One reason for this seemed to be a failure to build a critical mass of users and content around the resource. However, there was no clear understanding of what would make such an initiative succeed, and there was scepticism among some funders about whether a new website for knowledge-sharing would be used.

Together with ACF and the City Bridge Trust, NPC proposed to run a simple, small scale and practical pilot for six months, to test demand for a knowledge-sharing website to:

- see if there was sufficient demand and whether a user base could be built; and
- learn lessons about how to make such a website work or find out why it would not work.

Crucial to this pilot was the belief that the site would need dedicated resources (a part-time staff member) and support from a steering group to build a user base and generate content in the early stages. The founders were also open to the possibility that the initiative might not work, and were keen from the start that it should be evaluated to see what lessons could be learnt. With support from nine trusts and foundations, the pilot ran from June to December 2011.

About this report

This report presents the evaluation of the knowledge-sharing website at the end of the six month pilot. We set out how the site has developed, what it does and who has been using it. We then discuss results from the evaluation. Finally, we reflect on the lessons from the pilot and suggest next steps for its development.

This report is intended for all funders interested in learning and sharing knowledge. In particular, it is intended for those trusts and foundations that have supported the pilot project, and those that are using the site. We also hope that it will have broader relevance to organisations interested in knowledge-sharing and in using online resources to enable knowledge-sharing, for example, membership bodies in the charitable sector.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful for the support of the nine funders who have supported the pilot, and particularly to the City Bridge Trust for its ongoing commitment to this project. We are also very grateful to the members of the steering group who have volunteered their time and expertise to help develop the website. A full list of references is included at the back of this report.



The Baring Foundation



Diana
Princess of Wales Memorial Fund
THE WORK CONTINUES

nominettrust



Trust for London
Tackling poverty and inequality

Woodroffe Benton
Foundation

1. About the site

The Funder Network website launched in June 2011. It is a closed forum, not accessible to the public, but open to all funders, defined as staff and trustees of grant-making organisations. In this section we briefly outline what the site does, who is using it and how they interact with it.

What does the Funder Network site do?

The site has three basic functions:

- **A question and answer space:** This is a place where funders can post a question to other users, and receive answers. Questions can be about anything from application processes (*'Do funders set eligibility requirements in relation to reserves?'*) to infrastructure (*'Can anyone recommend a law firm that specialises in charity law?'*). Other funders then post responses or links, or suggest contacts. Over time, the questions will build up to create a knowledge base for funders to search.
- **A blog:** The blog allows organisations to post longer articles sharing outcomes and lessons from their work and seeking comments from others. There is usually around one blog topic posted each week, with topics including recruiting trustees, use of social media, getting applications online, environmental policies and thematic reviews.
- **A search tool:** A customised Google search allows users to search funders' websites for reports, research and resources. It is designed to help those researching specific funding areas or practices, looking to learn from prior work and uncover existing knowledge in an area that might be new or out of date for them.

When users register, they specify their areas of interest, which define the email alerts that they receive from the site.

Knowledge Sharing
a place for funders

Home | Blog | Our Partners | Question & Answer | Search for Knowledge | Feedback

17th Oct **75 is the new 65.....**
Filed under: Age - Children & young people (including early years, children in care, education, NEETs) and Older People • Health (including mental health, substance misuse, chronic illness, autism etc) • Learning - (including training, professional development, knowledge sharing etc) • Research and policy change • Society (equalities, penal affairs, homelessness, poverty, migration, unemployment) — Jenny Field @ 09:31 from City Bridge Trust

75 is the new 65.....
...says a report published by IPPR with funding from City Bridge Trust
It's a fact of life that each and every one of us grows older every day but we're also growing older for much longer. Whilst this no doubt brings bring many benefits, it also sets a number of challenges about how we meet the needs of older people and a growing ageing population.
We funded IPPR to research the needs of London's fast growing older population to help us increase our understanding of the diverse and complex issues this raises. We discussed the findings at a conference at Guildhall on Wednesday 12th October 2011 where their report **Older Londoners** was launched.
The predictions are startling:

- The number of over 65's are set to rise by 33% over the next 20 years but the number of over 90's is predicted to rise by 95%.
- There is a larger rise in ageing among London's minority ethnic population and by 2031, minority ethnic communities are expected to make up around a quarter of the over-80 population compared with 12% today.
- The gap in life expectancy between men and women is narrowing. The number of men aged over 80 in London is projected to increase by 50% over the next 20 years compared to an increase of one-third amongst women.
- Currently, 700,000 people in England have dementia but population ageing mean this is set to double to 1.4 million over the next 30 years.

Jenny Field, Deputy Chief Grants Officer, The City Bridge Trust

Log out

Recent Blog Posts

M&E: A problem shared is a problem halved (1)
Last week I was at a seminar with six charities and a funder that work with disadvantaged young people, to discuss the challenges of measurement and evaluation (M&E). Three interesting messages came out of the seminar. First, even when charities
Read More

Online applications – more pros than cons (0)
Four years ago the Pilgrim Trust was a completely paper-based organisation and a common refrain in the office was “does anyone have the file?” If you visited us today you would more likely hear someone say ‘the application’s been downloaded’
Read More

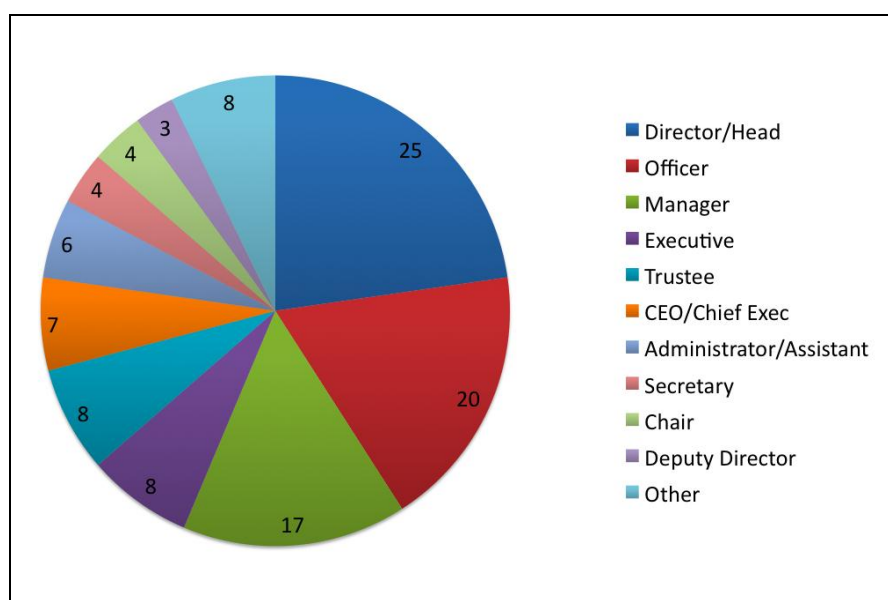
Who is using it?

The site has 300 users from over 150 organisations. This is a very promising start, representing a third of all ACF members. But there is clearly a much wider audience to reach, with an estimated 8,800 organisations making grants in the UK today.¹

Among the 150 organisations that have so far signed up, there is a good mix: from large, established foundations with dozens of staff, to smaller, local trusts with a single director. One aim of the site was to broaden the scope of existing networks to reach beyond London and beyond the 'usual suspects'. Continuing to reach out to more funders will be a priority for any further development. Indeed, as the evaluation findings show in more detail below, there is particular value in the site as a 'support network' for funders that are represented by a single director or trustee, especially if they are not able to attend events and network in person.

NPC's research has found that most funder networks are aimed at the CEO or senior levels of organisations, so another aim of the site was to encourage knowledge-sharing among different staff levels. An analysis of the site's users shows that there is a good spread of staff members and levels of seniority (see Figure 1). Again, ensuring that this diversity of voices continues will be a priority for the site.

Figure 1: Breakdown of users by staff position



How do people use the site?

Figure 2 shows the traffic to the site over a five month period (4 July 2011 to 29 November 2011). The highest peaks show around 100 users coming to the site in a day, and the lower peaks show a more general level of 25–50 users using the site more regularly.

¹ ACF and CAF (2007) *Grant-making by UK Trusts and Charities*.
<http://www.acf.org.uk/publicationsandresources/publications/index.aspx?id=98&eid=364>

Figure 2: Web stats showing traffic to the site

Traffic to the site is prompted by two main drivers:

- Marketing** of the site, which encourages new users to sign up and existing users to revisit. Since the launch, the site has been promoted to ACF members and other funding bodies, including London Funders, Environmental Funders Network, Grant Funders Network, Philanthropy UK readers and the Association of Charitable Organisations (ACO). ACF also sends update emails to regular users, summarising recent highlights of popular questions and blogs. These lead to 'spikes' in traffic, which can be seen in the diagram above.
- Email alerts** of questions and blogs being posted on the site. When a new blog or question is posted, all registered users with a relevant interest receive an email notification and a link to the site. Since launch, the site has had more than 20 blog posts, 35 questions and 170 answers or comments.

Over time, we hope that the second of these drivers becomes more dominant, reducing the need for marketing, and making the content self-sustaining. As content builds on the site and is categorised, more users should proactively visit in search of information.

People are using the site regularly: over 45% of those responding to our survey said that they visit either at least once a week or every couple of weeks.

Of the 300 users, around 28% have contributed some content to the site. This is high compared to other online forums, where on average, only 10% of users provide content.² Encouraging more users to join the site and contribute content is an priority for the site as it develops. But it is also important to recognise that many users get value from the site without contributing directly—for example, by reading posts and seeing which issues others are concerned about. For example, the number of comments on blog posts is often low, but this is not an indication that readers are not interested. Analysis of web statistics shows that lots of people are reading blogs, even though they are not leaving comments.

² See: Media Focus website: <http://mediafocusuk.com/?tag=1990-rule>; Arthur, C. (2006) 'What is the 1% rule?'. The Guardian website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/jul/20/guardianweeklytechnologysection2>.

2. Evaluation methodology

The evaluation of the website began at the start of the pilot by developing a 'logic model' for the site—that is, a theoretical framework of how the website's functions and the actions of its users would lead to certain outcomes and impact. We also identified indicators and means of data collection. Appendix 1 shows this logic model in more detail.

Research questions

The evaluation of the pilot website set out to answer four main questions:

1. What outcomes are achieved for website users?
2. Is there demand among users to continue beyond the pilot?
3. What are the barriers and challenges the site faces?
4. What could be done to improve the site?

Methods

As well as regularly seeking feedback from users on an informal basis, the evaluation consisted of three elements:

- **Analysis of web statistics:** ACF monitored use of the site through Google Analytics, which provides information and statistics about how people use the site.
- **Survey of site users:** We sent a survey to the 300 registered users of the website and received 73 responses (24%). Those responding were broadly representative of users as a whole in terms of proportion of ACF members and staff positions within funders.
- **Interviews with site users:** Following the survey, we interviewed eight trusts and foundations in order to gather more detailed feedback. In most cases, these were funders who completed the survey and volunteered to provide more detailed feedback.

Limitations of the evaluation

Due to the small scale of the pilot, and in order to keep costs down, the evaluation has been conducted by NPC and ACF, both of whom have been involved in running the site and in the steering group. As such, it is not an independent, external evaluation. We have endeavoured to remain transparent and conservative in our methods and conclusions. However, we recognise that such an evaluation is necessarily limited.

There is a clear sample bias in that the individuals who use the site regularly and have a favourable view of it are most likely to take the time to complete the survey and agree to be interviewed. There is also a sample bias in that we only surveyed existing users, not the wider funding community. Efforts were made to interview funders who had not signed up, but this proved difficult. The evaluation therefore provides a fair view of funders who have registered to use the site, though it is likely to be positively biased towards those who are more engaged users. It does not provide any information on funders who have not signed up to use the site, and their reasons for not using it. This could be explored further.

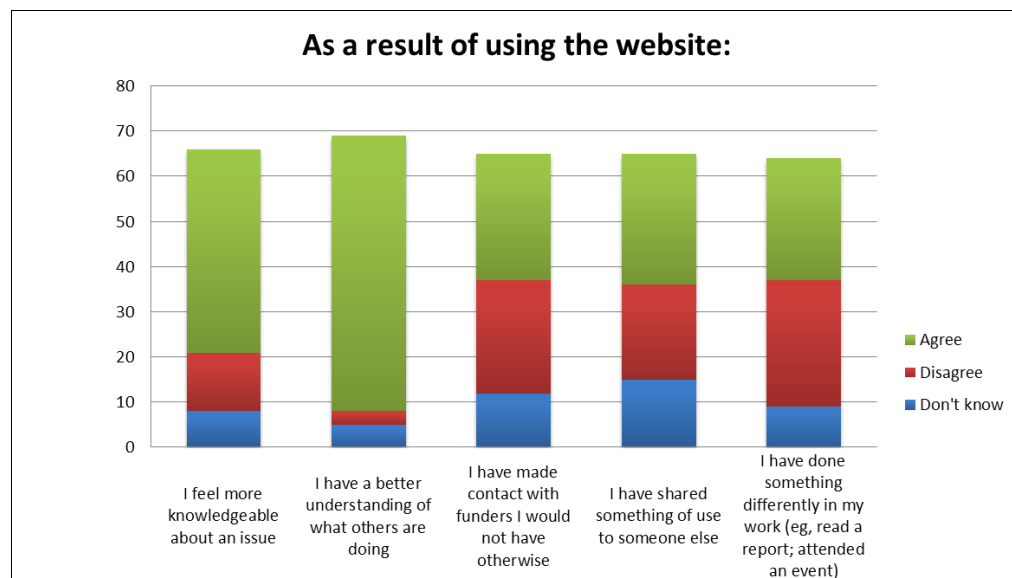
3. Evaluation findings

The intention behind the website was that it would help funders to learn about issues, understand what others were doing, and share what they are doing (see Appendix 1 for a full list of intended outcomes). The evaluation tested these outcomes by surveying and interviewing the users. The findings presented in this section are based on survey responses from 73 users (24% of all those registered on the site) and eight interviews.

The website has had a number of benefits, particularly in increasing understanding of others' work

As Figure 3 shows, the majority of users feel that the site gives them a better understanding of what others are doing (88%), and that they are more knowledgeable about an issue (68%). Positive responses to the other three outcomes were more modest: around a third of respondents said that they had made contact with other funders, shared something via the website, or done something differently as a result of the survey. Roughly equal number disagreed that these outcomes had been met.

Figure 3: Outcomes of using the website



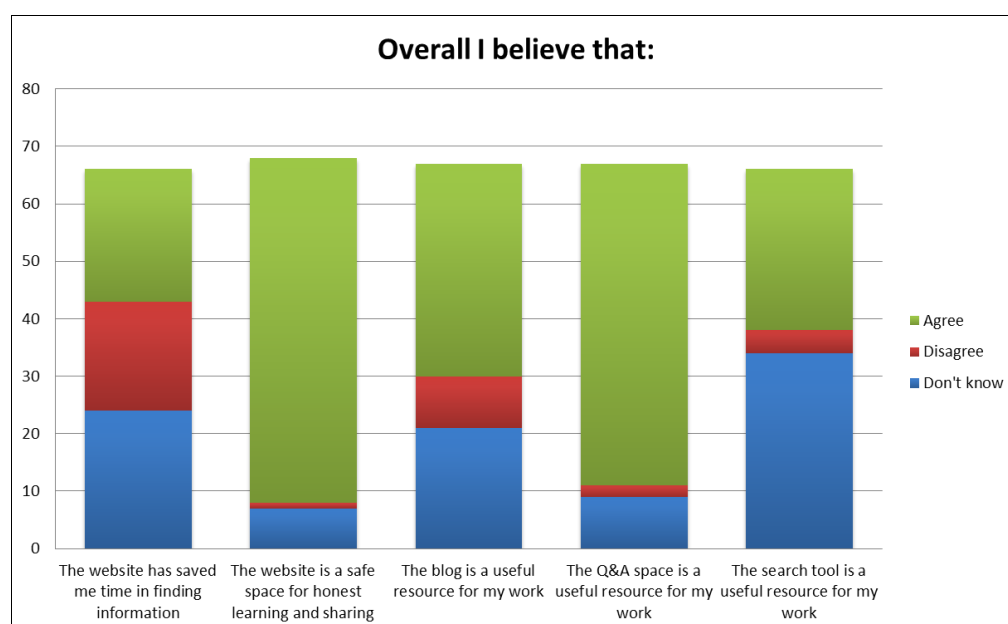
These responses suggest that the site is helping users to find out what others are doing and learning about an issue, but a significant proportion of funders who use the site are not actively contributing (either content or contact), or are not yet applying what they learn on the site in their work. One explanation for this is that at present, some funders are using the site in a relatively passive way—logging on to see what questions are being asked and to read blog posts, but not yet posting themselves.

This is perhaps understandable given the early stage of development and the relatively narrow range of content. It is also typical of website use more broadly, where only around 10% of online communities contribute content. Users may be initially cautious, or the existing questions may not have given them the opportunity to respond. This is not a particular cause for concern. Interviews with funders revealed that they thought the website was valuable as a place to look and learn, and stated that they would post a question or blog when they felt the need to, and that they would be more likely to do this as the content on the site grows.

The Q&A section is seen as the most useful function, but many users are unsure about the search tool

The Q&A section was rated as the most useful area by 83% of respondents, followed by the blog (55%). Just over 50% of respondents did not know if the search tool was a useful resource, and only 40% agreed that it was useful. The fact that so many respondents did not know whether the search tool was useful may suggest that more needs to be done to explain its purpose and to signpost users to it. Please see [‘What were the Challenges?’](#) for more detail.

Figure 4: Views on aspects of the site



Overall, the site is seen as a safe space

When exploring the potential for a knowledge-sharing website, one area of concern for funders was whether anyone would be willing to share their views online, and whether it would be possible to create a private forum where information and opinion could be shared freely. It is therefore very encouraging that the vast majority of respondents (88%) said that they felt the site is a ‘safe space’ for learning and sharing.

This was reinforced by interviews where several funders stated that the content was seen as trusted because it comes from peers (*‘not professionals with something to sell’*, as one funder put it). Interviewees commented that they would like to see who else has signed up, and the number of people using it, but that overall the site provided the right level of anonymity and confidentiality.

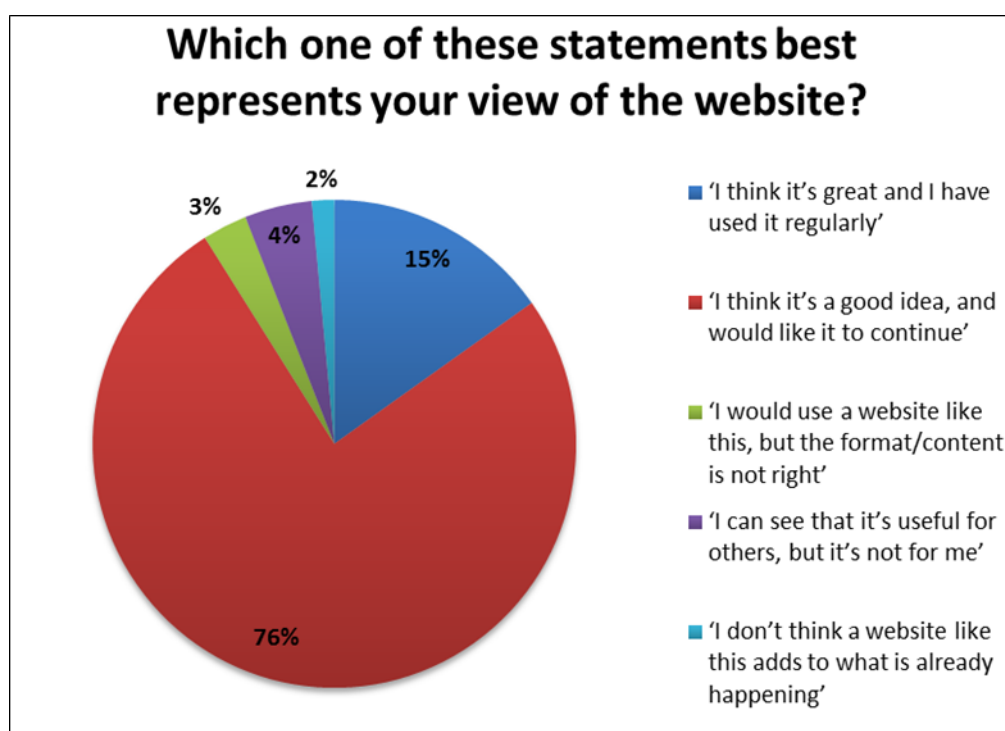
Interviews highlighted that it was important that the site remained a private space (rather than being open to a wider audience), stating that the site’s value lay in the fact that it was a safe space *‘to ask stupid questions’*. Within the site, however, more may need to be done to make users feel that they can contribute more freely, and we wondered why there was not more discussion and response to blogs on the site. Some funders speculated that users worry about being controversial or giving opinions in response to carefully written posts, or about issues of status between different users. For example, if a director of a large foundation has posted a comment, would a junior grants officer feel that he or she can comment or post an alternative view? Similarly, one survey respondent commented that their director and one of their trustees also used the site, which constrained the staff member in what they could write and how much they were seen to be using the site. Addressing these barriers will be important for the site in

encouraging more contributions from different staff within organisations and building more content on the site.

Over 90% of respondents to the survey view the website as useful and want it to continue

The survey results show that there is strong demand for the website to continue: 91% of respondents said that the website is 'good' or 'great', and that they would like it to continue. Interviews revealed that the site had a number of specific benefits for users. Interviewees really liked the content and the practical focus of questions: they wanted a place to discuss '*everyday mundane matters*', not necessarily to get into debates or offer opinions. Interviewees also highlighted that the site makes it much easier to share information, and gave them a good feeling when they were able to answer a question.

Figure 5: Overall views about the value of the website

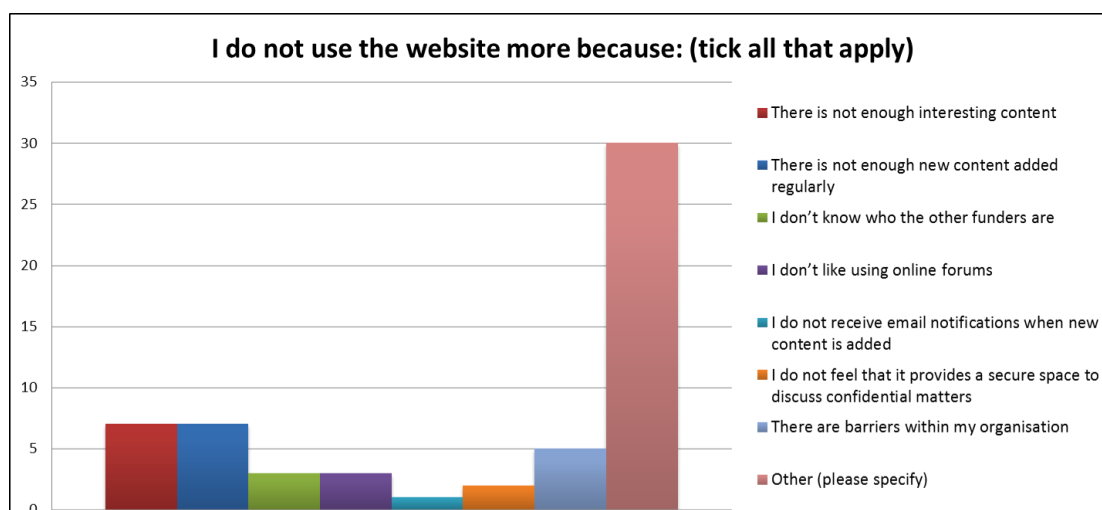


A very small number of users did not see value in the site or felt that it was not right in its current form. However, this view may be held by a much wider number of funders who are registered on the site but did not complete the survey, and those who have not registered yet. One interviewee commented that the site will not be useful for all funders, nor should it try to be—it should concentrate on building use and content among organisations that are looking for networks and support, and struggle to find these through existing channels.

‘Not enough time’ is the biggest barrier to use

Based on the feedback from existing users, ‘not enough time’ seems to be the dominant barrier to greater use of the site. This is in spite of the fact that many of those responding to the survey also commented that the website actually saves them time in searching for information. In the survey, when asking users why they do not use the website more, we decided not to offer ‘lack of time’ as an option, in order to encourage users to think through exactly what it was about the site that made it an imposition on time, rather than something that could potentially save them time. Nonetheless, of 30 responses to ‘other’ barriers in Figure 6, 17 specifically mentioned not having time.

Figure 6: Barriers to greater use of the site



The responses to the survey and informal feedback from funders imply that the website is perceived by some as a duty, and that learning and knowledge-sharing are seen as additional rather than core activities. Any continuation of the website must explore how it can be seen by more funders as something that helps them find and share information, and saves them time, rather than an imposition or afterthought. In order for the website to have wider reach it needs—as users have said—to be a ‘first port of call’ and ‘the go-to place’ for information. This may involve adding additional resources, such as a repository of reports or notice board of upcoming events, or improving the notifications and log-in process. We discuss this further in [‘Conclusions and next steps’](#).

Users pointed out that having to log in to the site was a significant barrier to use, and this is reinforced by the statistics from Google Analytics, which show that the log-in page has a 25% ‘bounce rate’, which means that one in four users get as far as the log-in page but then decide not to proceed.

Users like the design of the site, but there are several areas for improvement and development

Most comments about the design and look of the site were very positive, with people finding the site clean and easy to use. Respondents also said that the notifications (whilst uninspiring visually and sometimes blank) were a great prompt to visit the site regularly. A message from interviewees was to keep it simple and not try to add too much complex functionality.

Respondents to surveys and interviews did highlight a few areas for improvement. Users commented that the categorisation of topics could be clearer, and that the search function could be more prominent. Interviewees also had a number of ideas about how the site could be improved. Suggestions included:

- **A repository of reports or key documents:** This could include documents from ACF on governance or legislation, for example.
- **An FAQ section:** Users were keen to see a history of Q&A questions so that they could look up which questions had been asked before, or find answers to popular questions.
- **A notice board:** This could highlight upcoming events and be a '*news area where you could post a link to a publication, conference or similar*'.
- **Categorisation of content:** A number of users commented that they would like the site to develop areas around particular themes, such as IT or finance. Others requested categorising content according to ACF Issue Based Networks (IBNs): '*It would be a really useful space to continue discussions that began in IBNs, or for those who missed a meeting to catch up.*'
- **One-to-one contacts:** Several funders wanted to be able to contact others on a one-to-one basis via the website, whether by messaging them directly, or potentially through a Skype connection.

It is important to keep building the membership, especially among smaller organisations and among junior staff

The priority for developing the site is to keep expanding the user base and building the content. Traffic to the site is driven by new content so this would create a virtuous circle. We particularly want to reach out to:

- **Smaller trusts and foundations**, particularly outside London. These funders do not typically attend events or network through ACF, and they rely on small numbers of staff—often just a director or trustee working alone to administer grants. It is arguably these funders that have most to gain from the website.
- **Junior staff** within larger funders, who have few opportunities for learning and sharing lessons with peers from other organisations. Interviews with funders highlighted that the potential value of the site was in getting information from trusted peers, particularly those working 'on the ground', and that lots of valuable learning—the tacit knowledge—emerges from lower levels of organisations.

Users of the website suggested a number of ways of reaching new funders, including sending targeted emails to staff, providing taster sessions, and getting users to 'recruit a friend'.

The site is valuable to a core group of funders but more needs to be done to widen its reach

The findings of the survey suggest that funders can broadly be split into three levels of engagement, each of which is receiving different benefits from the website.

- For a **core group of funders**, the Funder Network website already has real value. Funders say that it provides a place to learn quickly what others are doing, it saves them time in searching for information and it helps them to share what they are doing with others. They say that it provides a valuable support network and a safe space to learn from trusted peers. For these funders, it is clearly achieving its intended outcomes.
- For a **wider group of funders**, the website is 'nice to have' in its current form: a useful, but not yet essential resource. However, these funders recognise that it holds potential and that as the content builds and more funders get involved, it can become increasingly valuable. These funders want the site to continue, and building the user base and content will be a priority in engaging them more fully in the site.

- For the **broader funding community** who have not yet registered, or who have registered but not used the website, it has not yet had benefits. More needs to be done to understand the needs of this group, and find out what can be done to engage them. The evaluation has focused on existing users and has, perhaps understandably, struggled to gain feedback from those who have not engaged with the pilot.

4. Lessons

One aim of the evaluation was to explore what makes online resources for learning and sharing work, what challenges they face, and why they might not work. This section provides a brief overview of the main lessons that we learnt from developing the pilot.

What has worked?

Dedicating resources to building interest and content

Websites are often seen as a free resource, with users generating content for online communities. However, it can be difficult to build a critical mass of users that sustains interest and content. In the case of the Funder Network, having a dedicated staff resource and steering group was important in promoting the site to potential users, encouraging regular blog posts and addressing issues with the site.

Running the site as a pilot

The provisional nature of the site meant that users were willing to offer feedback on both good and bad elements, whereas a fully-fledged website might have met with resistance and apathy. Because the impetus for the site came from the practitioners in the sector, they were committed to giving it a fair chance and making time to use the site.

Visiting trusts and giving site demonstrations

Showing people what the website could do and how easy it was to use resulted in a larger number of people signing up in the organisations visited, and people within those organisations felt more confident about using the site as a result.

Providing automatic email alerts

The email alerts, based on user-selected areas of interest, were a great reminder for people to come back to the site, and once they had come back they spent time looking around the other content that had been added. Google Analytics of the site shows spikes in traffic following email alerts and on average, users view four or five pages on each visit.

Retaining the flexibility to make changes quickly

We received feedback early on that users would like to see who had asked a question or left a comment, as this would give context to any advice or opinion. We also heard from users that they wanted email alerts for answers to questions and blog posts. The advantage of using 'open source' software and having a staff member to liaise with the developer meant that both changes were implemented quickly.

Defining clear accessibility criteria

In planning the site, there was a question about the extent to which it would be open to the public, and who should be allowed to sign up. Making the website closed to non-funders has been important in creating a 'safe space' for funders to share. Having eligibility criteria and ground rules (for example, no solicitation for services) has been important in maintaining the purpose of the site. Allowing access to both members and non-members of ACF has given the site a good mix of users. Although the majority are ACF members, there has been interest from local funding groups, local authorities, community funding associations and trusts of all sizes from around the country.

What were the challenges?

Depending on developers for technical changes

Although it has been possible to retain flexibility and make some changes in response to users' demands, in some areas it has been more difficult to improve the site in good time. The benefit of building the site on 'open source' software means that it will be possible to address this at the next stage of development.

Developing a useful foundation search tool

The foundation search tool has not been well used, and survey responses highlight that users are not sure of its value. In future, the Third Sector Knowledge Portal at the British Library may provide a more effective alternative. This is a new resource that offers a fully documented archive of all publications and resources related to the third sector, which will be tagged and made easily searchable.

Finding willing bloggers

At times, the site has been short of new blog posts and the moderator has had to actively solicit posts to ensure a weekly contribution. Encouraging comment and discussion around blog posts has also been difficult. One challenge here is that the blog has been seen as a relatively formal commentary, which is both a barrier to contributors (feeling that they have to put lots of time into producing something polished), and to those commenting (feeling that they cannot have anything to add to an already comprehensive and well-balanced post). Despite this, it is encouraging that the readership figures are high, and it perhaps provides an unrealistic expectation to list so prominently the number of comments that each blog has received. Many other popular blogs in the sector often do not receive comments.

Excluding potential users

As mentioned above, it has been important to establish clear criteria around access to the website. However, despite defining these criteria clearly and writing Terms of Use, decisions about who should be allowed to access the site are not always black and white. For example, some people hold multiple positions—for example, as a trustee of a grant-making trust, a manager of an operational charity, and a freelance consultant. While the first of these roles is clearly relevant to the Funder Network site, the second and third may represent a conflict of interest: the individuals may wish to fundraise or look for work. The site is moderated to ensure that people are using it in the spirit of collaboration, but there is a clear challenge in maintaining the 'safe space' and in excluding some potential users.

Categorising content

In the first phase of the website, the priority was to build a critical mass of content. However, as a certain volume of content has been built, it is now increasingly important to categorise it and make it searchable. Feedback from users has highlighted the challenge of trying to find answers to historic questions on the site, and of searching for content specific to particular issues. The existing 'interest areas' that users select on sign-up are not suitable for organising content on the site because they are not comprehensive, and users have not found them intuitive to use. As content builds, these interest areas will become increasingly important for searching the website.

5. Conclusion and next steps

This evaluation shows that the Funder Network website has been successful in meeting the aims of the pilot. A user base has been established, useful content has been built up, and there is definite appetite among users to continue.

The site has over 300 users from 150 trusts and foundations, and the quality of content is very high. Nine in ten of those surveyed say that it has given them a better understanding of what others are doing, and that it is a valuable resource that they would like to see continue. Many say that it has helped them to save time in their work, and acts as a valuable support network.

However, at its current stage of development, the site remains 'promising' rather than 'proven'. It is dependent on a core group of early adopters and on the efforts of ACF to drive interest and content. A critical mass of users still needs to be built for the site to be sustainable in the long-term and to offer greater value to a wider range of funders.

Next steps

This evaluation provides valuable feedback and ideas on how the site can be improved. ACF now plans to continue and develop the website. However, the extent and nature of this development will depend on the support and involvement of funders and, in the longer term, finding a model to make the site sustainable.

The steering group has identified three key areas for development:

1. **Recruiting more users:** To realise the site's potential, it will be critical to build the user base, particularly by reaching out to more smaller and regional organisations, and to more junior staff within organisations. There was clear demand in the survey and interview responses for wider involvement.
2. **Growing and categorising the content:** A number of users fed back that the content needs to be easier to search, so that users can find information on the site, and that email notifications need to be better targeted to their areas of interest. There is a possibility of linking the site to existing networks and groups such as ACF's IBNs.
3. **Improving the email notifications:** The email notifications that alert users to new content are the main link into the site, but at the moment they are not visually interesting, and the links to the site take users to the log-in page, rather than directly to the question on the website. Improving the look and accessibility of these links will be important in improving the flow of traffic to the site.

Further to these priorities, the survey and interviews raised a number of good ideas for additional features, such as a repository of useful documents, a list of existing users, and a calendar of upcoming funder events. We will explore the potential for adding new functions to the website and look at what can be done to improve it without making it unduly complex or expensive.

What you can do

We welcome your ideas and support in helping to make the website a success. If you are already using the website, spread the word to other funders and continue contributing to the site. If you have not been involved so far, we would like to invite you to participate—whether contributing resources, ideas or signing up to use the website. Please contact Kimberly Harwood at ACF to get involved or find out more: kimberly@acf.org.uk.

Appendix 1: Logic model

At the start of the pilot, we developed a 'logic model' for how the website's activities linked to outcomes and impact for users. This informed the design of the survey.

Indicators	Activities / Outputs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People visit website ▪ People search for information ▪ People read posts ▪ People ask questions ▪ People follow links ▪ People contact others ▪ People post comments or answers ▪ People indicate they are experts 	Outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People learn something new ▪ People identify something of interest to them that others are doing ▪ People have a new idea applicable to their work/their organisation ▪ People find information more easily than they had previously ▪ People have a channel to share information ▪ People have a channel to ask for input/involvement ▪ Diverse staff and organisations engage in knowledge-sharing 	Impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ People do something differently in their work as a result ▪ The information informs a course of action that people take ▪ People take actions to align/cooperate with a peer ▪ People save time ▪ People are more knowledgeable about the sector/their area of work ▪ People achieve something they wouldn't otherwise have/achieve it more easily: (eg, find a partner, arrange an event, influence somebody)
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Analysis of web stats and usage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ User surveys (emailed, or pop-ups on website) ▪ Interviews ▪ Analysis of web stats 	

Appendix 2: Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the following organisations for funding the pilot website:

Baring Foundation

The Bedford Charity (The Harpur Trust)

Big Lottery Fund

City Bridge Trust

The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund

Nominet Trust

Northern Rock Foundation

Trust for London

Woodroffe Benton Foundation

We are also very grateful to the following individuals and their organisations for supporting the pilot website through involvement in the steering group:

Carol Mack, Michael Jousiffe

Association of Charitable Foundations

Simon Marshall

Big Lottery Fund

Jenny Field

City Bridge Trust

Andrew Cooper

The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund

Lucy de Las Casas, Tris Lumley

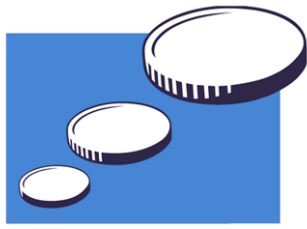
New Philanthropy Capital

Dan Sutch

Nominet Trust

James Hope

Woodroffe Benton Foundation



New Philanthropy Capital

New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) is a charity think tank and consultancy dedicated to helping funders and charities to achieve a greater impact.

We provide independent research, tools and advice for funders and charities, and shape the debate about what makes charities effective.

We have an ambitious vision: to create a world in which charities and their funders are as effective as possible in improving people's lives and creating lasting change for the better.

For **charities**, this means focusing on activities that achieve a real difference, using evidence of results to improve performance, making good use of resources, and being ambitious to solve problems. This requires high-quality leadership and staff, and good financial management.

For **funders**, this means understanding what makes charities effective and supporting their endeavours to become effective. It includes using evidence of charities' results to make funding decisions and to measure their own impact.

New Philanthropy Capital

Third Floor 185 Park Street London SE1 9BL

t: +44 (0)20 7620 4850 f: +44 (0)20 7620 4851

w: www.philanthropycapital.org e: info@philanthropycapital.org

A company limited by guarantee. Registered in England and Wales No. 4244715.
Registered charity number 1091450.

New Philanthropy Capital © All rights reserved